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C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000085

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/02/2020
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PTER](#) [SENV](#) [KWMN](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: POSITIVE SIGNALS FROM THE GOT REPRESENT
OPPORTUNITY FOR THE U.S.

REF: A. TUNIS 81
[1](#)B. TUNIS 69
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Classified by Ambassador Gordon Gray for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

[1](#)1. (C) In the past six weeks, the Tunisian government has been signalling, with some consistency, that it would like to warm and energize its relationship with the U.S. A series of USG visitors, including, most recently, NEA DASes Sanderson and Wittes, Deputy AFRICOM Commander Holmes, and CODEL Lynch, have been received cordially, and at high levels, by Tunisian officials. A mid-January cabinet shuffle replaced a cool francophone Foreign Minister with a gregarious American-educated one. In a January 26 meeting, a senior MFA official explicitly told DAS Sanderson that Tunisia wants to "turn the page" and "do a lot of work together" (septel).

[1](#)2. (C) Summary continued: The Embassy recommends the USG take advantage of this apparent opening, which can help us advance our agenda on human rights, contribute to improved relations with the Tunisian public, boost economic and commercial ties, and solidify cooperation on regional security and counterterrorism. Specifically, we should look at sending more high-level visitors, launching a human rights dialogue, and ensuring a successful annual meeting of the Joint Military Commission in Washington in April. End summary.

Recommendations

[1](#)3. (C) We believe that the GOT is sending us a concerted signal that it wants to improve relations with the U.S. After a distinctly chilly period, particularly in the past eighteen months, the Embassy strongly believes the USG should seize this opportunity to advance U.S. objectives, both bilateral and regional. Specifically we should:

-- Launch a bilateral human rights dialogue (already successfully previewed to senior GOT officials by DASes

Wittes (ref C) and Sanderson). We propose Assistant Secretary Posner convoke Tunisian Ambassador Mansour to stress USG interest in formalizing this process. This meeting could be a prelude to a high level DRL visit to Tunis, which would impress the Tunisians with our commitment to a principled and results-oriented dialogue. The late January visit by a UN Special Rapporteur on human rights (ref B), and the unprecedented access he received, is an encouraging sign;

-- Hold the annual Joint Military Commission meeting in Washington, as planned, in April and make it a counterpart visit, making a strong impression on Tunisia's new Defense Minister early in his tenure; And

-- Send more high-level Washington visitors to Tunis in the coming months.

- The Tunisians tell us they are looking forward to Science Envoy Zerhouni's visit, which we expect will advance our science and technology cooperation, in keeping with the Cairo and Marrakech agenda.

-- Our GOT interlocutors tell us they would be delighted to welcome Assistant Secretary Feltman, (who kindly followed our recommendation to avoid a stop in Tunis in the period surrounding the October 25 elections).

Other visitors who we believe could now make a particular impact would include:

-- S/CT Ambassador Benjamin, who could help reinforce our message to the Tunisians that the U.S. wants better channels

of communication and stronger and more consistent counterterrorism cooperation; And

-- S/GWI, Ambassador Melanne Verwee, with whom the GOT would be pleased to discuss Tunisia's strong record on women's rights, and who would be well placed to argue to the GOT that it should move to translate its relatively progressive social policies into better human rights practices across the board.

Relations on the Upswing

14. (C) A series of USG visitors in January and early February were cordially received, and heard a generally upbeat message, from Senior Tunisian officials. DAS Wittes met the Minister of Communications, the Minister of Higher Education, and the number two at the Foreign Ministry, and AFRICOM Deputy Commander Ambassador Holmes was received by the new Defense Minister, barely a week after his appointment in a cabinet shuffle. That shuffle also put in place Kamel Morjane, a friendly, U.S.-educated former UN official as the new Foreign Minister, replacing the icy francophone Abdelwahab Abdallah. In a January 26 meeting, Saïda Chtoui, de facto Deputy Foreign Minister, told visiting DAS Sanderson that her new Minister was "very open" and stressed that Tunisia was eager to "turn the page" with the U.S (septel). Chtoui predicted "positive changes" in the relationship in the coming months, and made clear the GOT would like to see more high-level visits to Tunisia. CODEL Lynch, making a brief stop in Tunisia on return from a visit to Afghanistan, was also warmly received by Chtoui on February 1.

15. (C) Positive atmospheric improvements are also extending to our economic, commercial, and cultural cooperation. On the cultural front, GOT Ministers told DAS Wittes they would resolve a longstanding blockage in our Fulbright educational exchange program. The Ministers of Commerce and Development and International Cooperation each received DAS Sanderson on January 26 and underscored their interest in relaunching Trade and Investment Framework Agreement talks and in completing an Open Skies Agreement. Also in January, after

more than a year of repeated requests, the Tunisians also finally agreed in principle to allow the U.S. Coast Guard to conduct several port security assessments later this spring, a key certification needed to maintain uninterrupted commercial shipments from Tunisia to the U.S.

¶6. (SBU) Following a first-ever franchising exhibition in December, in which U.S. participants were eagerly welcomed and courted, the GOT sent us in late January, in record time, names of participants in a USG-funded export promotion visit to the U.S. We are also anticipating good access and cooperation from the GOT during the February 15 visit of a number of U.S. companies, on the margins of a USDOC Trade Mission to Algeria and Libya.

¶7. (C) In an ongoing series of courtesy calls, the Ambassador has been received warmly by members of President Ben Ali's cabinet, many of whom express enthusiasm for increased practical engagement. GOT officials are enthusiastic about beefing up science and technology cooperation and have said they will welcome the planned March visit of Science Envoy Dr. Elias Zerhouni. The Minister of Environment, for example, told the Ambassador on January 26 (septel) he would like his experts to work with the U.S. EPA and planned to invite the Administrator to visit Tunisia.

¶8. (C) The past six weeks have also seen noticeable atmospheric improvements to our bilateral military relationship. The Tunisian military has recently become noticeably more responsive to routine requests for information. They participated in a January exchange of military intelligence analysts, and were uncharacteristically flexible to a U.S. proposal to amend the date of the bilateral annual planning conference. Tunisia's Director of Military Intelligence also recently expressed to SDO/DATT his enthusiasm for attending the U.S.-organized DMI conference to be held in April in Nigeria, and senior Tunisian military officers have also recently become more receptive to invitations to U.S.-organized representational events.

...But More Improvement is Needed

¶9. (C) Most of the developments cited above remain atmospheric rather than substantive improvements. With few exceptions, Embassy officers still need to file diplomatic notes to get access to GOT interlocutors, and the Embassy has a long list of pending meeting requests that have gone unanswered, for months in many cases. The GOT's ambivalence to invitations to attend U.S.-organized multilateral events, such as the February 2-4 UNSCR 1540 biosafety workshop, seems in tact, although we were pleasantly surprised at the GOT's decision to send delegates to a U.S.-led cybercrime workshop in Malta February 9. As discussed ref D, while the January cabinet shuffle put in place a Foreign Minister clearly more open to engagement with the U.S. and the west, the same shuffle left the hard line Interior Minister in his seat, and other hard liners remain in key positions of influence, suggesting that domestic repression and human rights abuses will continue. Nonetheless we believe we have an opportunity to move the relationship forward.

GRAY